

# The “Boris Bounce”? Some Critical Reflections

***By Professor Alex De Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies***

I have a confession to make. For some time now I have been consistently of the view that a Prime Minister Boris Johnson, once ensconced in the hot seat would do a U-turn (perhaps in keeping with his previous form) and be more moderate in his tone with leaving the EU and even seek an extension to the deadline on October 31st for leaving the EU.

Have I been premature in surmising this? It might well look like I have – Johnson has if anything, been remarkably consistent in his edict that the UK will be leaving the EU on October 31st – come what may. This stance has been reinforced by the appointments to his Cabinet, and of course the appointment of Vote Leave Svengali, Dominic Cummings as Special Advisor (or *de facto* Deputy Prime Minister, as some in the liberal *commentariat* have dubbed him – somewhat ironic for an individual held by Parliament to be in contempt of it).

Whilst “BoJo” denies the intent to leave the EU with No Deal, the actions of the Government to date in ramping up the rhetoric on dumping the “anti-democratic” Northern Ireland backstop and announcing yet another £2.1 billion of spending on preparing for leaving the EU without a Withdrawal Agreement do indeed suggest that this is the intention of Johnson and his colleagues in Government.

Are we really headed down the path of No Deal then? To answer this is to look at the issue from a number of levels. At the base (legal) level, No Deal is the default scenario. That is, if the UK does not ask the other EU-27 leaders for yet another extension to the Article 50 withdrawal period then it will be leaving the EU come 11pm on October 31st.

And by “the UK” only the Head of State or their representative thereof can ask for an extension – that is, the Queen as Sovereign, or the Prime Minister. Parliament cannot do this. Johnson has reiterated that he will not do this.

As Professor Vernon Bogdanor, writing in *The Guardian* on Tuesday 6th August commented, whilst Parliament could “instruct” a PM to ask for an extension (or otherwise pass a motion trying to prevent the Government leaving with No Deal), it would be difficult to enforce in practice and would require the Commons to suspend Standing Order 14, which gives the Government control over the legislative timetable. It is also unclear how this might be achieved as the mechanism used previously (whereby legislation related to Brexit was amended) is likely to be unavailable. In Bogdanor’s own words:

*“If backbenchers were to succeed in taking over the legislative timetable, they would in effect be taking over the functions of government. Logic surely requires that they themselves become the government....”*[\[1\]](#)

We are therefore left with a situation whereby the only feasible way of averting No Deal is for Parliament to pass a vote of “No Confidence” in the Johnson Government. Under the Fixed Term Parliament Act, if such a motion were passed then there would be a period of 14 days whereby the Commons could seek to form an alternative government.

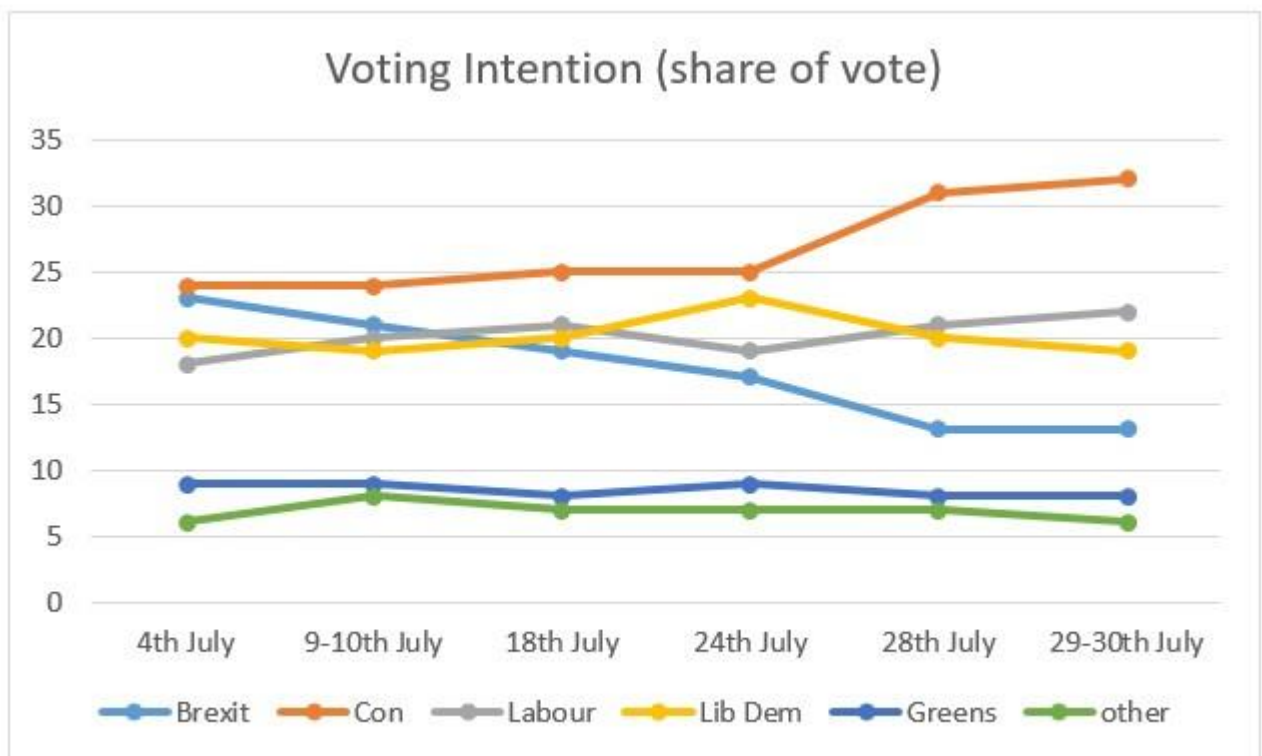
As a motion of No Confidence cannot be tabled until after the summer parliamentary recess, in September, for those who oppose No Deal (if this indeed turns out to be the Government’s intention) then time probably has run out, given the minimum six-week (campaigning) period needed to enact an election.

Indeed, it has been argued that this is the Government’s strategy, with Dominic Cummings surmising that the UK could exit the EU before an election were to occur[\[2\]](#). Professor Howarth convincingly argues that there are still mechanisms whereby a “no deal” Brexit can be averted[\[3\]](#). However, the political will to do so does not appear to exist.

Why then is Johnson seemingly so steadfast in this regard? From his own rhetoric, the answer is obvious – neutralise the challenge posed by Nigel Farage’s “Brexit Party” and in the process “defeat Jeremy Corbyn”. And Johnson, who as London Mayor defeated Ken Livingstone twice in the electoral contest, is seen by many in his Party as a vote-winner – someone who can deliver an “electoral bounce” (or “Boris Bounce” if you will) and restore flagging Tory fortunes.

But this answer is fundamental. The Conservative Party, whose supporters overwhelmingly favour Brexit, had been seen to have failed to deliver it by the original stated deadline of March 29th 2019. And in the process Theresa May as PM paid the price by losing her job. Thus the only course of action available to it was to see off the Farageist challenge and “deliver” Brexit “come what may” (notwithstanding the simple fact that had hard-core Brexiter MPs voted for Theresa May’s withdrawal agreement then the UK would already be departing the EU).

In so doing, if polling evidence is to be believed, then there indeed does appear to be something of a “Boris Bounce”, with the Conservatives increasing their share of voters’ stated intentions (for those who intend to vote should there be a Westminster election) over the course of July to 32% (as shown in the chart below) – with a corresponding decrease in stated support for the Brexit Party (all other parties over this period have a more-or-less constant vote share, according to YouGov).



Source: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/voting-intention/all> (various)

It hardly goes without saying that if this was representative of the wider British populace and delivered vote results in a uniform pattern across the UK, then were a General Election to be held now – thanks

to the UK's "first past the post" voting system – then Boris Johnson and his Conservative Party would in all likelihood be returned with a majority and therefore an "electoral mandate" to proceed with Brexit.

The regional breakdown of voter intentions (for those who intend to vote, should a Westminster election be held now, as shown in the table below) does not in my view do anything to alter this prognosis. For the YouGov poll taken on the 29th-30th July, the results, if anything make a meltdown for Labour more likely (given its current Brexit stance), with the SNP predicted to win 42% of the vote in Scotland (which would pretty much see it win all constituencies in Scotland), and the Brexit Party polling stronger than average in the Midlands/Wales (15%) and the North of England (18%), placing further pressure on Labour marginal seats in those areas.

### **Voter Intentions by Regional Aggregate, July 29th-30th 2019**

PARTY	REGIONAL AGGREGATE (% share of voter intent)				
	London	Rest of South	Midlands/Wales	North	Scotland
Brexit	7	12	15	18	12
Conservative	29	38	32	30	18
Labour	27	18	25	28	11
Lib Dem	28	23	16	13	15
Green	9	8	8	9	1
SNP	0	0	0	0	42

Source: [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/twa1h7mn6m/TimesResults\\_190730\\_VI\\_Trackers\\_w.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/twa1h7mn6m/TimesResults_190730_VI_Trackers_w.pdf)

For those of a "Remain" persuasion these figures are very cold comfort, and only serve to provide further grist to the mill for Labour to adopt an unequivocal stance to commit the UK to another Brexit referendum and campaign to stay in the EU. If this is not the case then Labour will lose votes to the Liberal Democrats (or the Greens, or the Scottish National Party etc.) and suffer an electoral wipe-out.

There are thus good reasons for the Conservative Party to expect a "Boris Bounce", with the Tories polling particularly strongly in their affluent southern shire heartlands. The recent Lib Dem victory in the Brecon and Radnorshire by-election doesn't change this in my view. As it is, I do now think it is most likely that the UK will leave the EU

with No Deal, as it would appear that time has run out for Parliament to effect an alternative in this regard.

Only the still improbable prospect of an alternative “Government of National Unity” (consisting of Labour, remainder Tories, Lib Dems and others of that ilk thereof) would prevent this from happening. Not impossible, but rather unlikely.

And in contrast to Boris Johnson’s claims that the UK could use the so-called “GATT 24” Provisions to stop the EU putting up tariffs on UK goods, this will not be the case –and it is highly likely that new checking regimes at EU borders will also come into force; adversely affecting UK manufacturing – with “[Carmageddon](#)” in the automotive sector, “Pharmageddon” in pharmaceuticals and farming “[Farmageddon](#)”.

Of course, with two months to go until the October 31st deadline, how Johnson handles the practicalities of exiting the EU could yet deflate his “bounce” and as the 2017 General Election outcome showed, polls need to be interpreted with caution. To come back to my original stance, it (however improbable) could yet still transpire that the UK finds itself in the EU after October 31st.

However, as things stand, for businesses (and others exposed to trade or work in the EU) the message is seemingly and starkly simple. Prepare for severe disruption. NOW.

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/06/mps-thwart-boris-johnson-no-deal>

[2] <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/08/03/dominic-cummings-tells-mps-missed-chance-stop-no-deal-brexit/>

[3] <http://www.democraticaudit.com/2019/08/05/is-it-too-late-to-stop-a-no-deal-brexit/>